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THE STARS LOOK DOWN and, AN OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS,

Director Sir Carol Reed first gained widespread attention for his poignant story of life and death in a Welsh mining town, THE STARS LOOK DOWN (1939). Based on A. J. Cronin's novel of the same title, the film centers on Davy Fenwick (Michael Redgrave), a miner's son who goes to college against the wishes of his poverty-hardened mother (Nancy Price). Returning to his home town, Davy negates much of his effort to better his life by marrying a shallow, unhappy woman (Margaret Lockwood) who eventually becomes involved with another man. But Davy is able to renew his idealism and act as the miners' representative in the movement for safer working conditions, a need dramatized by the film's final scene in which a group of miners, including Davy's father and brother, are trapped in a flooded mine shaft.

Although the story of THE STARS LOOK DOWN was potentially an embarrassingly sentimental one, Reed was able to avoid that trap and create a starkly realistic portrait of the miners' predicament that bears comparison with Barbara Kopple's HARLAN COUNTY, USA and not with John Ford's HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY. Ironically, THE STARS LOOK DOWN received little critical attention when it first appeared in this country, since at that time audiences preferred Ford's prettified treatment to Reed's realism.

Twenty-odd years later, immediately after THE THIRD MAN, Reed made another profound comment on the human condition with AN OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS (1952). Joseph Conrad's novel provided the basis for the story of Willems (Trevor Howard), an essentially irresponsible individual who tries to redeem himself in the eyes of his employer, Captain Lingard (Ralph Richardson). However, presented with temptation in the form of the beautiful Aïssa (Kerima), Willems gives away an important secret with which he had been entrusted and is subsequently destroyed by the captain.

Set in the East Indies, AN OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS is graced with an unusually good cast, also including Robert Morley as Almeyer, another of Lingard's employees, and Wendy Hiller as Mrs. Almeyer. The native woman Aïssa is one of Reed's most memorable characters, her silent beauty simultaneously attracting and frightening as much to the audience as to the miserable Willems. Like THE STARS LOOK DOWN, AN OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS has rarely been shown since it was first made, despite the fact that critics including Paulene Kael consider it one of the major films of the last thirty years.

Unfolded March 1977